



**WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LANDS
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING
ON**

**Discussion Draft, the *Military and Veterans in Parks (MVP) Act*; H.R. 1786, the *GROW Act*;
H.R. 1829, to *Require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey the Pleasant Valley Ranger
District Administrative Site to Gila County, Arizona*; and H.R. 2468,
the *Mountain View Corridor Completion Act***

July 20, 2023

Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and distinguished members of the House Committee on Natural Resources – thank you for the opportunity to submit Wounded Warrior Project’s views on legislation pending before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands.

Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) was founded to connect, serve, and empower our nation’s wounded, ill, and injured veterans, Service members, and their families and caregivers. We are fulfilling this mission by providing more than a dozen life-changing programs and services to over 191,000 registered post-9/11 warriors and 48,000 of their family support members, continually engaging with those we serve, and capturing an informed assessment of the challenges this community faces. We are pleased to share that perspective for this hearing on pending legislation that would likely have a direct impact on many we serve.

Discussion Draft, the *Military and Veterans in Parks Act*

Throughout our organizational history, WWP has explored new and innovative ways to offer care and support to those we serve. Across more than a dozen programs and services offered at no charge to warriors or their families, five often promote outdoor recreation in programming due to the multitude of health benefits from exposure to direct sunlight and nature: Physical Health and Wellness; Project Odyssey; Soldier Ride; Adaptive Sports; and the Alumni Connection Program. These nation-wide adaptive-capable offerings may include activities like biking, hiking, fishing, hunting, archery, camping, and snow and water sports in pursuit of improvement in social, physical, and mental well-being. Depending on the activity, staff experience, and local availability, we offer these opportunities to warriors independently or



through a contracted vendor/organization. We have a comprehensive process dedicated to ensuring the quality of the event, accessibility for all warriors, and measurement of desired outcomes. These measurable outcomes include physical and mental well-being; improvements in physical activity, sleep, nutrition; and reductions in symptoms of depression and chronic pain.

In this context, we believe that the *Military and Veterans in Parks Act*, or the *MVP Act*, would help disabled veterans, members of our Armed Forces, and surviving families access our nation's public lands for activities to improve their mental and physical health and well-being. The *MVP Act* includes several provisions aimed at improving access and accessibility for veterans including six that we would like to highlight:

- Allowing the creation of at least one adaptive trail and at least one adaptive recreation opportunity at each area managed by the Forest Service, each National Park, and each area managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). [Section 2]
- Developing and disseminating materials for members of the Armed Forces and veterans to educate on the availability and location of resources to access outdoor activities in the areas maintained by the Forest Service, National Parks, and the BLM. [Section 3]
- Reducing amenity recreation fees and streamlining the recreation permit process for members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and Gold Star Families. [Section 4]
- Creating partnerships between federal agencies and state, tribal, local, and private entities to promote outdoor recreational programs among members of the Armed Forces and veterans. [Section 5]
- Creating a joint national strategy between the Departments of the Interior and of Agriculture to increase visits to federal recreational lands by members of the Armed Forces, veterans, and Gold Star Families. [Section 6]
- Encouraging these federal agencies to hire veterans in all positions related to management of federal recreational land. [Section 8]

In March 2022, WWP offered our perspectives on outdoor recreation to the Task Force on Outdoor Recreation for Veterans established by the *COMPACT Act* (P.L. 116-214 § 203).¹ Points raised then are still relevant today, including our desire to increase public awareness campaigns about free and discounted opportunities for veterans, expand the availability of adaptive trails and water entry points, explore the potential of veterans-preference weeks or events at National Parks, and improve public awareness on the mental and physical health merits of the outdoors, specifically for veterans. WWP believes that the *MVP Act* addresses each of these issues and would create meaningful impact for those we serve.

¹ See, Notice of Request for Information Regarding Veterans Outdoor Recreation, 87 FR 10,281 (Feb. 23, 2022) (WWP comment available at <https://www.regulations.gov/comment/VA-2022-VACO-0001-0147>).

Wounded Warrior Project believes in the healing and connection outdoor recreation can bring to veterans. We have witnessed the benefits that being outdoors, increased movement, time in nature, adoption of a new hobby, and the opportunity for reflection has on an individual's health and their relationships. And as more and more warriors experience these benefits, we have heard firsthand from warriors seeking to relocate to areas with more accessibility to adaptive sports and from caregivers sharing stories about how adaptive recreational activities have made the veteran in their lives happier, more talkative, and more eager to push their perceived limits. We appreciate Representative Jen Kiggans' work on this draft bill and strongly encourage its introduction and passage in the House of Representatives.

H.R. 1786, the *Get Rewarding Outdoor Work for our Veterans Act*

A variety of military occupations involve large amounts of time working outdoors in relatively harsh environments. These types of jobs leave many veterans with wilderness survival skills, a keen knowledge of various ecosystems, and other skills that are related to outdoor recreation. Despite this experience, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently observed that “[v]eterans comprised a smaller proportion of employees in outdoor recreation positions than in the larger federal workforce. For instance, veterans accounted for 11 percent of federal outdoor recreation employees. By contrast, veterans made up about 18 percent of employees across all occupations at the corresponding agencies.”² In addition to the financial benefits that would accrue from increasing veteran employment, outdoor work can have important mental health benefits. Research has shown that direct sunlight exposure and being in nature can lead to reduced depression, improved physical and psychological well-being, social connection, resilience, and other benefits.

The *GROW for our Veterans Act* would establish a two-year pilot program to employ veterans in conservation and resource management positions. The *GROW for our Veterans Act* would further require the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Veterans' Employment and Training and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a pilot program under which veterans are employed by the Federal Government in positions that relate to the conservation and resource management activities of the Department of the Interior.

This bill would utilize best practices from the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Warrior Training Advancement Course (WARTAC) program to help veterans secure employment at the Department of the Interior. WARTAC connects veterans with real-world job opportunities to help them gain the skills and experience that are helpful for finding future careers. The *GROW for our Veterans Act* would also direct VA to submit a report to Congress and the head of each federal agency that details the best practices and hiring elements of WARTAC, and Department of Labor to report on how best to implement these recommendations at federal agencies.

Wounded Warrior Project proudly supports the *GROW for our Veterans Act* and shares its vision to help veterans find quality Federal occupations that allow them to use their outdoors

² U.S. GOV'T ACCOUNTABILITY OFF., GAO-23-106149, VETERANS EMPLOYMENT: GI BILL BENEFITS CAN HELP LEAD TO OUTDOOR RECREATION CAREERS (2023).

skills and passions to conserve and protect our public lands. We appreciate Representative Mike Levin for introducing this legislation and urge its passage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Wounded Warrior Project once again extends our thanks to the Subcommittee on Public Lands for its dedication to our nation's veterans. We are honored to contribute our voice to your discussion about pending legislation, and we are proud to support these initiatives under consideration that would enhance veterans' access to our nation's great outdoors. As your partner in advocating for these and other critical issues, we stand ready to assist and look forward to our continued collaboration.